You’ve just been given an assignment and now have to figure out what to do with it. The difference between earning an A or a C can depend on how well you have read and understand the assignment sheet. This tutorial is going to give you a set of basic assignment components to look for as well as a few tips to help you succeed in completing an assignment without any surprises.

The first step is to look for logistical information. When first reading the assignment, circle or make notes in the margin as you read, use these notes as a checklist later. The basics are: due date, this will give you an idea of how to organize your time to finish the assignment; length, how long of a paper it should take to address the question/idea/topic, if it’s much longer or shorter than the assignment states you should speak to your instructor; style, is this a writing and citation style you’ve used before, do you need to find a style manual, if not mentioned in the assignment, your syllabus may indicate which style to use for all assignments in the course; formatting, double-spaced or single spaced, margin specifications, font, font size or page numbers; sources, will you need to do any research and/or visit a library.

The body of the paper should be no less than 1500 words (6 double-spaced pages) and no more than 2000 words (8 double-spaced pages). Style and citation formatting should follow the Chicago Manual of Style (CMS). Use a minimum of 8 authoritative sources, 3
of which should be scholarly articles. Due no later than the beginning of class, March 7, 2011.

SLIDE 4

Many assignments set the stage with some context or background information. In this example, the assignment begins with a brief summary of the class lecture about the endangered species status of the Lesser Antillean Iguana. Take a moment to read this example.

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As discussed in class, the Lesser Antillean Iguana is in great danger of extinction through deforestation, feral cats and dogs, and the introduction of the other iguana species, the Green Iguana, which competes for the same resources.

Since assignments are generally based on concepts or information introduced in class, it’s a great idea to identify the assignment topic then look through your notes for additional related information.

SLIDE 5

Other common parts of an assignment sheet include prompts from your instructor to focus your writing and direct questions to be answered. Take a moment to read through this example:

What systems are currently in place to address this problem? Are they successful? Look at the various systems and solutions and choose one. Use this to build a well-researched and compelling argument to reallocate funding to save the Lesser Antillean Iguana using what you believe to be the most effective model.

In this example, the first two questions are not intended to be directly answered in your essay; they provide a framework for the overall theme of the assignment. The third sentence, the assignment itself, is to build a well-researched and compelling argument. This indicates that the essay must be argumentative and use quality resources.

SLIDE 6

It is important to understand the assignment and your role in completing it. If your roommate were to ask you “what’s this assignment about?” could you tell them? If you can’t easily give a basic description of the task you should revisit the assignment sheet and then seek out your instructor for clarification. As
a rule of thumb, after you first read an assignment sheet, ask yourself to fill in the blanks to this prompt: “The purpose of my essay is to ___ in order to ____.” If you applied this to our example assignment, you might say “The purpose of my essay is to build a strong and convincing argument for the best solution to save the Lesser Antillean Iguana in order to receive the largest amount of available conservation funds.”

**SLIDE 7**

Let’s take a look at the major parts of the research and writing process. Each blue block represents a chunk of that process, the larger the chunk, the more time it will usually take, the smaller the chunk, the less time it will take. These are not exact proportions, but a visualization of how this process works for many people. Some parts of this process are recursive, you will move back and forth between one or more steps several times. As an example, when reflecting on your first draft you may notice the need for an additional source to support a specific argument, you will move back to the finding sources stage to meet this need. Go ahead and move your mouse over the blue blocks for an explanation of each step.

**SLIDE 8**

At some point in your assignment you will probably need evidence beyond the exploratory stage. It could be as simple as your textbook or as complex as a few dozen scholarly articles. In planning for this assignment, look closely at what types of resources you need to use (computer, software, books, databases, people), or places you will need to go to use them (libraries, archives, quiet time at home), and what types of time constraints may be in place. If you do need to go to the library, check to be sure it is open at a time you can go outside of class or work. Do you know the best places to find the sources you need? You may want to speak to a librarian first for help in formulating a search strategy and identifying appropriate tools and resources for your search. Always bring your assignment sheet with you when asking for help.

**SLIDE 9**

Ask your instructor to clarify any uncertainties or questions early on to avoid stress and rushed work later. They will thank you for doing this instead of turning in an incomplete or misunderstood assignment. When you get a final draft of the assignment finished, leave some time to reflect on your work. State the purpose of the assignment out loud to yourself, did you accomplish it? This is also a good time to check with your instructor if your paper doesn’t seem quite right and you need some guidance.
SLIDE 10

Have more questions about deciphering an assignment?

Contact a librarian! They can help you with these questions.

Check out your library's website for hours and contact info.